09 Canon of Witnesses: On Zarina Hashmi's *Home Is a Foreign Place*

Author: *Dorian Vale*

Affiliation: *Museum of One — Independent Research Institute for Contemporary Aesthetics*

Museum of One|Written at the Threshold

The room is unassuming; it doesn't announce itself. No grand entrance, no flourish, no fanfare, no theatrical beckoning of the gaze. Its walls are white, but not the white of sterility. They hold a hush, like the inside of an old book. They are white of parchment, of breath held in reverence, of the first page before ink dares to arrive.

Thirty-six sheets of handmade paper line the gallery, not crowded, but spaced as though silence itself had been appointed the curator. Each gap is a gesture, each interval a kind of reverence. What matters here isn't merely the word, but the hush that cradles it. The air, too, is part of the grammar.

They don't clamour. They don't perform. They wait, quiet, yes, but with the gravity of deliberation, not the tremble of timidity. One doesn't walk toward them. One approaches, as one approaches an altar, not fully convinced they are worthy. And upon arrival, it becomes clear: this is no installation. This is a liturgy for the exiled. Paper as prayer, silence as ritual, and each sheet a psalm in the tongue of the displaced.

Each page bears a single word in Urdu: *Ghar*, *Yaad*, *Sarhad*, *Safar*. Beneath them, the English translation: *House*, *Memory*, *Border*, *Journey*. But the translation feels wrong. Not grammatically. Morally. The English sits too flat, too efficient.

The Urdu above it curves and breathes. It looks like something spoken by someone who still remembered how to miss what was lost. The English below it looks like someone trying not to cry when asked to explain it.

This is *Home Is a Foreign Place* (1999), Zarina Hashmi's quiet masterwork. A cartography not of land, but of longing.

And yet, it contains no image. No body. No event. It resists narrative entirely. It offers instead a series of orphaned words, spaced evenly, printed with precision. There aren't any sentences, no stories, only fragments. But these fragments aren't broken. They're disciplined. Each word is a country with a border around it. Each sheet, a breath that was preserved before it disappeared. To stand among them is to stand inside a collapsed language. Not dead. But dislocated.

Urdu, here, doesn't plead for recognition. It holds its shape with solemn pride, like a mother tongue refusing to be mourned before its time.

Zarina Hashmi was born in Aligarh in 1937 and came of age beneath the shadow of one of history's most exquisite cruelties: Partition. In its imperial haste to divide land, Britain severed not just borders, but bloodlines, language, lineages, prayer, and the very grammar of belonging.

Millions were scattered like punctuation across a map drawn in indifference. But Zarina, unlike her contemporaries, didn't catalogue the carnage. She didn't sketch the rupture. She didn't show the wound. She gave us the silence that came after it. And in that silence, she found her material.

Her use of handmade paper wasn't a stylistic decision. It was an ethical one. Paper remembers. It stains, creases, warps with breath and time. It absorbs. Like grief. Like exile. To use paper instead of canvas is to reject permanence. It's to say: this doesn't need to last forever to matter. It only needs to be held, just once, by someone who recognizes what was almost lost.

And this, precisely, is why Zarina belongs in your Canon of Witnesses, and why her work embodies the central demand of Post-Interpretive Criticism. She doesn't interpret her own past. She refuses to. She doesn't give the viewer meaning. She gives them remains. Her prints don't explain what was taken from her. They show you what she managed to carry. Not through images. Through words. Words that no longer have a homeland. Only a page to rest on.

This is the most devastating gesture in the work. Not the Urdu, the English. It sits beneath each line like a secondhand ghost: pale, precise, and utterly estranged. Not a translation, but a transcription of something it never truly knew. It stands

there, obedient and incomplete, like a witness tasked with recounting a dream that passed through another's mouth.

The English tells you what the word *means*, but not what it *meant*. It delivers the address but forgets the voice that once called it home. And Zarina, in all her quiet discipline, doesn't correct it. She simply lowers it, typographically and morally. Placing it where it belongs: beneath, deferential, and devastatingly insufficient.

What you begin to understand as you move from print to print is that this isn't an artwork. It's a ritual of restraint. Zarina could've unscrolled the whole sorrow and told you her story. She could have drawn the map of her displacement. She could have named the grief, footnoted the ache, explained each work like a docent of her own loss. But she doesn't. Instead, she gives you the tools she lost, and trusts with a quiet severity, that if you are meant to wound you, they will.

This isn't about interpretation. It's about moral proximity. And like all work that belongs in the post-interpretive era, *Home Is a Foreign Place* asks only this: will you stand close enough to hear what is no longer spoken?

If *Home Is a Foreign Place* is the altar, then *Dividing Line* is the grave. A single pristine sheet of paper white as silence. Unblemished and untouched by memory. Its stillness feels sacred, like breath held at the threshold of mourning. And drawn across its surface, not with flourish, but with the precision of a surgical farewell, is a line in gold leaf. It arcs gently, almost seductively, across the page. It gleams without gesture. It behaves like ornament, but carries itself like omen.

Until you realize what it is.

It's the India–Pakistan border. Not imagined. Not stylized. The actual line, taken from the maps etched by colonial architects in 1947. That gentle, decorative shimmer on the paper is the same cartographic gesture that cleaved a subcontinent into violence that turned neighbours into enemies, languages into relics, and children into refugees. It's one of the bloodiest borders in history. And here, it's rendered without a single drop of red.

This is Zarina's most merciless refusal. She could've shown what the border did. Instead, she shows how little it took to do it. A gold line. That's all. Clean. Controlled. Its beauty is its betrayal. And in that betrayal lies one of the most

precise acts of Post-Interpretive Criticism ever mounted inside the frame of a gallery.

Because this isn't a critique of colonialism. It's the residue of its handwriting. There are no bodies here. No headlines. No emotive flourish. Only the form. Only the act. And it's in this act, the presentation of the wound as line, that Zarina demonstrates her deepest alignment with the Post-Interpretive Criticism doctrine. She denies the critic an easy subject. She gives you no violence to describe, no event to analyze, no context to decode. She leaves you only with the line itself. The symbol that caused everything and dares you to explain what it can't hold.

It would be easy to call this "minimalism," but that would be a mistake. Zarina isn't reducing. She's withholding. Her practice isn't stylistic. It's liturgical. She repeats the shapes that once governed her exile, not to interpret them but to keep them from being misused. In this way, her work is closer to preservation than to creation. She's not making images. She's protecting memory from interpretation.

This is the second principle of Post-Interpretive Criticism: some works don't ask to be decoded. They ask to be guarded. And Zarina is its priest. Her restraint isn't aesthetic. It is moral. She knows that to describe the wound is to move away from it. So she stays still. And in her stillness, she makes the viewer flinch.

Because what she exposes with almost unbearable softness is that violence doesn't always scream. Sometimes it's written in gold. Approved by governments. Hung in maps. Taught in schools. Admired for its cartographic elegance. And that's why she won't draw the blood. She will only show you the line that caused it.

Zarina's works don't invite interpretation. They test its limits. And nowhere is this clearer than in the materiality of her paper. It's often referred to as "delicate," but this is a misunderstanding. Her paper is not frail. It's disciplined. It's the skin of a memory that survived being spoken aloud.

Each sheet she worked with, handmade, fibrous, irregular, behaves more like skin than canvas. It breathes. It bruises. It carries the grain of human handling. To look at it closely is to see a topography: tiny mountains, collapsed fibers, embedded particles of time. This isn't surface. This is residue.

And what she prints onto it. Single words, gold lines, coordinates, diagrams of vanished homes never overpowers the material. Her ink enters the paper like breath enters a room. It stains without conquering. It appears, and then recedes, as if to say: "This was once a language. Now it is a scar."

Zarina's relationship to language wasn't literary. It was anatomical. Urdu was her mother tongue, not just linguistically, but emotionally. It was her childhood home, her sonic belonging. It was how her family said "food," "sky," "wait," "forgive me." It was the voice that accompanied her into exile.

But the world she entered: Art schools, grant applications, academic reviews, didn't speak Urdu. They asked for translation. And she obliged, but never obediently.

In her prints, English translations always appear beneath the Urdu. A positioning that isn't merely typographic, but political. She renders English as secondary, even when it becomes the dominant language of her practice. It's not a rejection. It's a moral ranking. The English doesn't own the meaning. It only chases it, shadow-like. Zarina's translations aren't bridges. They're admissions of failure. They say: "This is the closest I can come. But the house burned long before you arrived."

In *Letters from Home*, she scrawls handwritten Urdu letters onto paper planes. Letters from her sister, folded like fragile vessels. The script is looping, dense, intimate. But unreadable to many. The act isn't to inform, it is to preserve. To show the act of remembering without betraying it to the audience. This refusal to perform grief for institutional validation is what places Zarina firmly inside the Post-Interpretive canon.

She never breaks the fourth wall of mourning. She doesn't teach. She doesn't reveal. She honours what can't be shared. And in this, she teaches us something essential about criticism itself: *when a work refuses translation, it's not being obscure. It's protecting what no longer survives explanation*.

Zarina's art doesn't resist the critic. It asks the critic to resist themselves.

There is no monument to Zarina Hashmi. There is no mausoleum. No bronze cast of her hands, no institutional mural claiming her legacy with a tagline. What she left behind, carefully, consciously, were sheets of paper. Some torn, some

pressed, some so thin the light passed through them like breath through gauze. She didn’t give us a story. She gave us a vocabulary of restraint.

And perhaps that’s the most radical gesture of all. In a world that rewards articulation, she chose to guard the unspoken. Where others constructed narratives of migration, she drew lines, one by one. Not to map exile, but to trace where belonging used to be.

This is what makes her work holy. Not in the religious sense, but in the post-interpretive sense: she made things that can’t be described without losing their moral proximity. And so she refused to decorate them.

She didn’t frame grief. She wrapped it in handmade paper and handed it to the room like a child returning something sacred they didn’t know how to keep. Her works never ask to be "understood." They ask not to be abandoned.

And that, precisely, is the threshold Post-Interpretive Criticism is built upon: when understanding risks replacing presence, silence becomes the critic’s most faithful response.

Zarina doesn’t want her words decoded. She wants them witnessed. As you would witness someone praying in a language you don’t speak, not with analysis. But with stillness.

When she died in 2020, it wasn’t merely a life that ended. It was a language of mourning, and felt like a continent vanished with her. Not just a person, not just a voice, but an entire philosophy of how not to betray the memory of what you can’t say. And the only appropriate thing to do was remain quiet for a long time. Not because there was nothing to write. but because anything written would have felt like a desecration, too easily applauded.

Movement: The Post-Interpretive Movement

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